

## Impacting North Africa

Highlighting the Impact of AfDB Operations in Africa

# Alleviating Poverty in Rural Tunisia: An Integrated Approach to Agriculture

By Sofien Larbi, Karen McClendon, and Rafaa Marouki



*Imèd at work in one of his greenhouses (El Soukra district)*

It is hard to imagine anything growing in El Soukra, an arid village in the Southern Tunisian province of Gabès where temperatures can exceed 45° Celsius throughout the year. Located on the fringes of

the Sahara desert, El Soukra is better known for its hard, claylike-earth and patchwork collection of brush than for the endless horizon of olive trees that engulf Tunisia's northern landscape.

Ironically, it is in this very region that Imèd Boureguaa, an ambitious 31-year-old Tunisian, dreamed up a world where things could grow – and grow abundantly.

market in which to sell his produce, the road, financed by the Bank's Integrated Agricultural Development Project, also created a safe passageway for winter travels, when rain floods the desert landscape and makes commutes lengthier, more complicated, and expensive.

Equally important was the support that Imèd received from Tunisia's Regional Agricultural Development Commission, a government agency that provides technical assistance to farmers. With their help, Imèd, who had



*Peppers and tomatoes abound in the middle of the desert as Imèd's dream comes true (El Soukra district)*

### Integrated Agricultural Development Project of Gabès

- AfDB Financing: US\$ 18 million loan (50% of total project amount).
- Objective: to increase agricultural production and revenues of local farmers, while managing natural resources in a sustainable and equitable manner.
- Implementation Period: June 2001 to June 2009.
- Project Zone: Main municipalities of the Governorate of Gabès (Southern Tunisia)

"I always felt a powerful connection to the earth," Imèd recalled, describing his love of nature and agriculture. Unemployed for nearly two years after graduating with a Masters in Applied Physics, Imèd used his joblessness as an opportunity to turn a new leaf as a farmer, an unlikely transition that was facilitated by two key factors.

The first was the recent construction of a road linking the rural village of El Soukra with the nearby market town of El Hamma, an aspect Imèd credits with "...making [his] dream possible." Beyond providing a direct route between his desired plot of land and a

some notion of farming but no real expertise, devised a sound business strategy. Looking to leverage the rich geothermal waters that are abundant in El Soukra, his plan consisted of creating greenhouses ripe with tomatoes and peppers, key staples of the Tunisian diet.

A loan from Tunisia's Bank for Small & Medium Enterprises, and government subsidies for new farmers, sealed the deal, allowing Imèd to pay for a four month course on agronomy and geothermal farming. It also provided him with the financing necessary to cover

the start-up costs of his new business.

Today, in what was once a barren landscape, stand 14 separate greenhouses spread across one hectare of land. This profitable enterprise yields roughly 90 tons of tomatoes and peppers per

season, and employs several seasonal workers, including women. This all belongs to Imèd and exemplifies the combined power of infrastructure and technical assistance in unlocking the financing necessary to move from dreaming up ideas to implementing them.

## Leveraging Agriculture to Boost Income

To great measure, it was this potential that gave way to the Bank's Integrated Agricultural Development Project. A collaboration with the Tunisian government, it provided a jumpstart for agriculture in the region of Gabès, where rainfall fluctuates between abundance and scarcity, and where the number of individuals working in the field is as significant as the number that are unemployed.

Against the backdrop of years of drought, the people from the province of Gabès had been increasingly leaving the region, drawn instead to more urbanized centers, and even the country's Mediterranean neighbors. In rural areas, where agriculture is the economic mainstay, more than 30,000 people live below the poverty line.

Making agriculture viable against the reality of a harsh climate thus stood out as a way to generate employment, increase income in rural areas, and even incentivize those who had left to come back. Components of the project ranged from rural infrastructure, to implementing methods to better irrigate land, conserve water, and prevent topsoil erosion, a feature prevalent in the desert region where winds are damaging to produce yields. Farmers also benefited from the rich expertise of the Agricultural Commission, who dedicated themselves to providing technical guidance reflective of farmer's needs, whether novice or expert.

Still, addressing rural poverty goes beyond cultivating crops – it also requires

complementary measures like facilitating trade and increasing access to markets. As evidence has shown, it also requires meaningful ways to engage women, most notably by empowering them through employment.

In the spirit of joint efforts, the Agricultural Commission worked with the Tunisian Ministry of Artisanry, providing rural women training in the art of weaving mergoums, the traditional Tunisian tapestries of thick wool-like fabric. These women were invited to take lessons in weaving and later tested for proficiency. Those who received high marks were then given the certification necessary to officially sell their wares, as well as the equipment required to carry on their newfound enterprise.



*BEFORE the Integrated Agricultural Development Project  
(arid land in the district of El Hamma)*

*AFTER the Integrated Agricultural Development Project  
(from aridity to fertility)*



# Artisanal Training : A foundation for Empowerment and Employment



*Fathia stands proudly in front of one of her color-filled mergoums (district of Toujène)*

For individuals like Fathia, the oldest of five siblings and the recipient of artisanal training and certification, such opportunities had dramatic results.

“...[I remember] when I was ten or twelve years old and the harvest was poor. Vegetables were too expensive to buy from the market and my mom would pretend she was fasting so that there would be just enough food for my

brothers and sisters...” Fathia recalled.

In those days, her father worked as a cleaner in the municipality of Toujène, generating so little income that Fathia had to trade school for housework, helping her mother raise her siblings. “...[Sometimes] my mom would add so much water to the milk it felt like drinking sour medicine”, she added.

Thankfully, that was then.

Roughly a decade later, a multi-colored mergoum hangs proudly on Fathia’s wall. Thanks to the courses offered by the National Office of Artisanry, Fathia received training, certification, and was encouraged to compete nationally with her products. For her dexterity and innovative design, Fathia won second place in the 2006 presidential competition for best hand crafted mergoum. More than her 2,000 TND cash prize – which she has invested in expanding her business – Fathia has gained national recognition for her skill, has been invited to expositions throughout the country, and has opened a small boutique next to her home.

That, however, is not her greatest pride. For Fathia, it is all about “...family. I can [now] look after my father who is sick, and provide him the medicine he needs.” Turning to

her brother with a wink, she playfully continues, “I think my brother is also happy because last year, I helped him buy the things he needed to get married...”. For women like Fathia, progress is more about giving back than getting, more related to providing for a family than oneself. Empowerment, evidenced through the will to continue in the face of all odds, is as strong and durable as the very fabric that is woven.



*Young trainees practicing their newly-acquired weaving skills (district of Wali)*

## The Road Ahead

Still, the road ahead remains promising.

The Integrated Agricultural Development Project has helped farmers plant over than 13,000 hectares of trees, ranging from figs and olives, to peaches and almonds. It has provided farmers with agricultural subsidies and training, and enabled the installation of over 320 soil and conservation works, including gullies, boreholes, and underwater tanks to prevent soil and water erosion. The project has also provided herders with over 2,000 animals to breed.

In the province of Gabès, the project has also helped empower women, where production of their rugs has increased by roughly 30% between 2002 and 2009. This in turn, has unlocked much needed income, an estimated 200 TND per



*Children on the road to school (Oasis of El Adaouna )*

month for families like Fathia’s who are engaged in weaving.

For the African Development Bank, which seeks to decrease poverty and improve the living conditions for Africans across the continent, it is a step towards a shared prosperity.

## Challenges

When an agricultural project is implemented in a desert-like climate, there will naturally be challenges going forward. In the region of Gabès, water scarcity and desertification are evident and will require innovative approaches to conserve surface and groundwater resources. In the more isolated zones of Gabès, securing reliable and affordable sources of energy to support agriculture-related activities is another major challenge, while continued investment in infrastructure – the tipping point for Imèd’s dream – will be equally necessary.

For the women engaged in artisanal crafting making, especially those who live in smaller villages, eliminating the middleman who purchases their goods is essential in helping them obtain higher profit, enabling families to have more of the money they desperately need.

For more information about the African Development Bank  
and its program in Tunisia, please see  
<http://www.afdb.org/en/countries/north-africa/tunisia>



The authors of this publication would like to thank Fathia Tarhouni and Imèd Boureguaa, the beneficiaries of this project for their candid thoughts and reflections, as well the Tunisian Ministry of Agriculture, the Regional Commission for Agricultural Development of Gabès.